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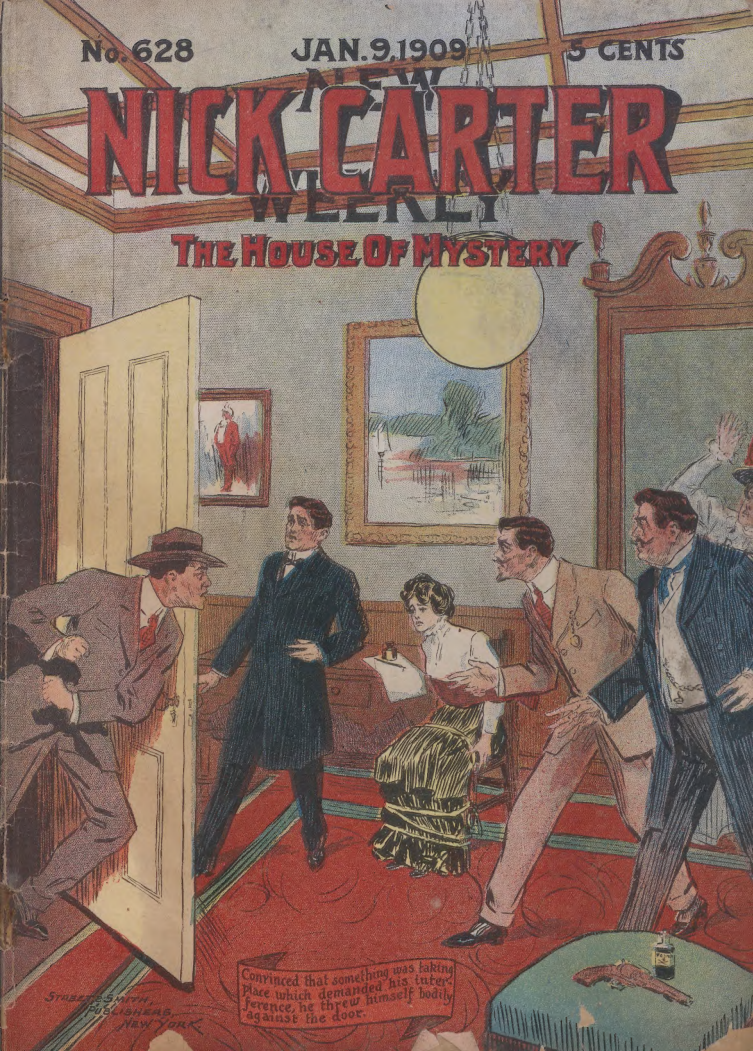
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY


Convinced that something was taking place which demanded his interference, he threw himself bodily against the door.
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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S STRANGEST ADVENTURE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN IN THE FOG.

Nick Carter had to confess to himself, as he paused in breathless amazement, that never before had he seen such a fog as this one in the City of New York.

In London it would not have surprised him. Just such impenetrable dense and opaque masses of fog are not infrequent in the metropolis of the eastern hemisphere, but it is only once or twice in a century that the like of that is seen in any part of the western half of the world.

There was a yellowish hue to it which rendered it the more opaque and impenetrable, and it was for the time being, at least, so thick and heavy and dense as to render a person who was wandering through it as if he were one blindfolded; as if the sense of sight had been suddenly taken from him entirely.

The detective's outstretched hand had come in contact with an iron pillar which he recognized by touch to be the standard of an electric arc-light; but, although he knew the light must be burning not more than sixteen or twenty feet above his head, so heavy was the dense shroud of yellow fog that looking upward he could not see even a glimmer.

It seems incredible that a fog could settle over the City of New York which would be so dense in its character that a man so familiar with the streets as Nick Carter was and is, should be entirely lost even within a mile or two from his own home.

But such was the case.

When it is related just how it happened that Nick Carter was lost at that particular moment, the circumstances will be better understood.

The detective had been dining at the Cretorian Club where he had entertained as his guest at dinner Monsieur Gereaux, at that time acting chief of the secret service department of the Paris police.

Gereaux had arrived in the City of New York the preceding day on a special mission, and had requested the personal assistance of Nick Carter in what he had to do. It so happened that the detective was not at home at the time of Monsieur Gereaux's arrival, but had been located over the telephone, and had made the appointment with him which resulted in the dinner at the Cretorian Club above mentioned.

The two had dined alone in a secluded corner where they had discussed the matter upon which the chief of the secret service of Paris was engaged; they had lingered over the meal and the discussion that followed

it until after midnight, and it was in fact approaching two o'clock in the morning when Nick Carter finally left the club to return to his own home.

The detective having secured a room at the club for the accommodation of the chief, went out upon the front steps and for a moment stood appalled by the aspect of things.

Never before had he known such a fog in the City of New York.

It stood before him, if the expression may be used, like a blank wall which had no top, bottom, sides, or ends.

From his position on the door-step he could not even see the pavement; the rails beside the steps he could just discern on either side of them, and his eyes could follow them for a foot or two only, when they seemed to disappear into nothingness.

For a moment he was undecided about venturing farther, and had the idea of returning to the club, and himself taking a room for the balance of the night.

But the suggestion seemed absurd; the idea that he, Nick Carter, would experience any difficulty in finding his way to his home was little short of ludicrous.

He threw away the half-smoked cigar and lighted a fresh one, then buttoning his coat around him to keep out as much as possible the dampness he descended the steps to the street.

It was like walking down into a mass of yellow smoke save only that there was no pungent odor from it, and the smarting, suffocating effect that would have been produced by smoke, was absent.

At the bottom of the steps he turned and looked back toward the club-house every window of which on two floors at least he knew to be alight from within; he could not distinguish one of them even at that short distance.

Again he hesitated, reluctant to lose his hold upon the balustrade, but again the absurdity of such a thought occurred to him and he released his hold, stepping forward to the middle of the pavement.

As he did so he distinguished the voices of two men who were conversing together near him, and which he had no doubt proceeded from two of the drivers of the club coupés, which were always in readiness before its doors.

"Hello, Mike," he said presently, recognizing one of the voices as belonging to a driver who had often served him; and the man replied, having also recognized the voice of the detective:

"Hello, Mr. Carter. This is quite a fog, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," said Nick, going closer to the man.

"Do you suppose, Mike, that you could find my house if I should get into your coupé?"

"Sure, sir; just as easy as falling off a log."

"Well, in that case, I think I'll let you drive me home."

"All right, sir; this way, sir;" and the man called Mike reached out, took hold of the detective's arm, and guided him through the door of the vehicle, the outlines of which the detective could not even discern until he was close enough to the carriage to touch it with his hands.

Seated inside he heard the driver mount the box, and in a moment they rolled away from the club entrance over the asphalted pavement on noiseless rubber tires.

The detective gave himself up to reflection after that, paying no attention whatever to the route they were taking as indeed he could not have done had he tried; but it did not occur to him to be doubtful of the ability of Mike Devlin to find his home.

So intent was the detective upon the problems he was studying, which had been presented to him in the conversation with Monsieur Gereaux, that he gave no thought to time, distance, or direction until suddenly it occurred to him that they had been a long enough time on the way to have reached his residence and have returned to the club as well.

It was at that moment that the coupé came to a stop and the driver descended and opened the door of the carriage.

"I am afraid, Mr. Carter, that we're up against it," he said.

"Why? How so, Mike?" asked the detective.

"Well, you see, sir, the fact is I'm lost; plumb lost."

"And you one of the oldest hack-drivers in the City of New York?" exclaimed the detective banteringly.

"Yes, sir; that's true, sir."

"Don't you know where you are, Mike?"

"I haven't the least idea in the world, sir."

"Don't you know what street you're on?"

"No, sir; I don't know whether it's a street or an avenue or a lane through the woods somewhere, only for the fact that the last named isn't usually paved with asphalt. I might be at the battery or Harlem or over in the Bronx or in Hackensack, New Jersey, for all I know."

"Can you find your way back to the club?"

"No, sir; no more than I was able to find your house."

"Well, what are you going to do, Mike?"

The driver laughed.

"I'm going to anchor this craft of mine right here,

Mr. Carter, and lay to until the fog lifts so that I can find my way about; and if you'll take my advice, sir, you'll make yourself comfortable inside the coupé and take a nap while we're waiting."

"Oh, no," said Nick, "I think I'll go on, Mike."

"But where will you go, sir? You don't even know where you are now."

"The coupé is standing against the curb, isn't it, Mike?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll follow along the curb until I get to a corner and then I'll climb up a post and find out what streets cross there. After that I think I will experience no difficulty."

And that is what the detective did do, but the corner at which he arrived was unfortunately not provided with street-signs.

He turned, not wishing to lose the line of the curb he was following, and sought a second corner where he experienced the same disappointment as at first. A third corner offered no better facilities, and he had tried at least half a dozen different ones before he arrived at the spot where the opening paragraph of this chapter discovered him with his hand against the standard of an electric arc-light.

Whether he was north or south, or east or west of his own residence in Madison Avenue, or in what direction the club would be from where he was standing, he had not the least idea.

There was something absurdly ludicrous, notwithstanding its rather appalling aspect.

The fog showed no indication of lifting or changing, and it seemed to him that he was destined to pass the balance of the night with his back against a lamp-post as if he were some belated tippler.

But after a moment he pulled himself together and laughed, after which he resolutely started forward again in search of another corner; the desire to know where he was had suddenly assumed the proportions of a mania.

In his eagerness in starting forward he took the middle of the sidewalk as he supposed, forgetting all about the necessity of keeping to the curb, and he had walked rapidly onward, between fifty and a hundred feet, when he came into sharp collision with a man who was traveling as rapidly in the opposite direction.

The impact of their meeting nearly threw both of them from their feet, although neither one fell; but the man with whom the detective had collided uttered a sharp exclamation that suggested a panic of terror.

The exclamation was uttered, however, in a voice which Nick Carter instantly recognized, and with a short laugh he replied to it.

"Why, Ned Connolly!" he exclaimed. "Where did you drop from? I thought you were on the other side of the world!"

The man called Connolly darted forward on the instant he heard Nick Carter's voice, and, seizing him by the shoulders with both hands, shook him as if to make certain that he was alive, exclaiming as he did so in that same voice of panicky fright he had used at first:

"Nick! Nick! Nick Carter! Thank Heaven it is you!" and to the detective's amazement Connolly began to sob.

"Ned, what is the matter with you?" said the detective shortly. "You're not the sort of a man to lose your nerve like this just because you get lost in a fog. Brace up, old chap."

It was a full minute before Connolly could control himself, and then he gasped out in broken sentences:

"Nick, it's the horror of it! Don't think I'm referring to the fog, because I'm not, but the horror of the experiences I have passed through since this dense mass of cloud fell over the city. Oh, it is awful! awful! I have been a witness to the most horrible crime I ever dreamed of. I have seen a wanton murder committed. Oh, Nick, for Heaven's sake, take me where I can tell you all about it. If I had been alone for another half-hour in this awful yellow mass of fog, I should have gone mad. Indeed, I am half-mad now. Take me somewhere, Nick, anywhere!"

CHAPTER II.

THE DEAD WOMAN IN THE CAB.

Edward Connolly was a man who was prone at times to the use of a little champagne, and the detective's first thought on this particular occasion was that this was one of those instances.

"Shake yourself together, Ned," he said, "and we'll presently succeed in locating ourselves. I have been following the curbs searching for corners and climbing posts to read the street-signs, but I haven't succeeded in finding any as yet. Keep your story, whatever it is, until I find out where we are, after which we will go to a hotel if we happen to be near one, or to my own house if it is not too distant."

We need not enlarge here upon the difficulties they met with in carrying out this idea, but the result of it

was that after more than another half-hour of ceaseless searching, Nick Carter finally climbed a post and read the signs thereon to discover to his pleased surprise that he was on the corner directly below his own residence in Madison Avenue.

You may be sure that he was not long in reaching his own door, and when at last he led Ned Connolly into his study, the hands of the clock pointed at a quarter-past four in the morning.

Having snapped on the lights, the detective turned to regard his friend, and was astounded at what he saw.

Connolly's face was drawn and haggard with the look of a dead man upon it. He was hatless; his collar had been torn from the fastenings in front; his necktie hung limply down over either shoulder; one lapel of his coat was torn until it dangled almost to his waist-line; his vest was open, and every button save one had been torn from it; the bosom of his shirt was soiled and stained in several places with blood; there was a large swelling upon his forehead, which had already turned to a blue-black, and all together his appearance was about as disreputable as can be well imagined.

"You look as though you had been through a cyclone, Ned," remarked the detective, with a reassuring smile.

"I have been through the infernal regions, Nick; literally through hades," was the solemn reply.

"Do you want to tell me about it now or wait till morning, Ned?"

"I want to tell you about it now. I must get it off my mind; but for Heaven's sake give me a swallow of brandy first."

"I'll tell you what you do, Ned," said the detective. "Get out of those soiled clothes as quickly as you can, while I turn on the water in the bathroom. I'll dig up some clean clothes for you, and you shall have the swallow of brandy when you come out of the bath. After that you can sit down here, and we'll smoke another cigar while you tell me your story."

And so it was, perhaps, half an hour later when the two men finally sat facing each other at either side of the glowing fire in the grate, and Edward Connolly began the story of his experiences of that night of fog.

For the sake of rendering the recital more personal than it otherwise would be, and in order to take the reader literally into the situations that occurred that night, we will give the story that he told to Nick Carter in the third person, but we will recount it precisely as he related it to the detective.

Therefore, if you will for the time being eliminate the scene that is now before us and put yourself in the presence of Edward Connolly alone while he was passing through the experiences we are about to describe, you will appreciate more fully why he was in that panic of terror at the moment when he encountered Nick Carter in the fog on a street corner in the City of New York, the locality of which neither of them were ever afterward able to determine.

Edward Connolly was a young man rather less than thirty years old who five years before had inherited an ample fortune, and who had since that time occupied himself in travel.

He had been absent from the United States upward of three years prior to the time of his meeting with Nick Carter as described.

He returned across the Atlantic Ocean on one of the steamships which berth at the city of Montreal, and had taken a train from there to New York the preceding day.

The train upon which he was a passenger was delayed in transit so that when he entered the Grand Central Station that night after eleven the fog had already settled upon the city.

Connolly, thankful to be at home again, seized his grip and left the Pullman, walked rapidly along the gangway platform of the station to the waiting-room, crossed it, and paused just outside the door at Forty-second Street, peering amazedly into the nothingness of the yellow fog.

The stanchions under the iron awning of the station, which reached over it to the curb below and not twenty feet away from Connolly, were invisible.

"Cab, cab, cab," the cry of the cabmen came to him out of the opaque mass like the quacking of ducks.

Connolly knew that the Hotel Belmont, erected during his absence, was directly across the street from where he was standing; that the Grand Union was on the opposite corner from it to the left; that it was only one short block directly up the street to the Manhattan, and yet the desire upon him to get to his own apartments, and to see his own things around him once more, was overwhelming.

It did not occur to him that the driver of a cab or the chauffeur of a taxi would be unable to find his way, and so, after a moment of hesitation, he called out:

"Hey there!"

Three forms jumped upon him suddenly out of the

fog; three hands were outstretched and seized upon his grip, and Connolly laughingly remarked:

"Look here, you fellows, I can't take three cabs all at once. What I want is one of those taxicabs which have been instituted in the city since I have been away from home."

Two of the men stepped backward and were swallowed up again by the fog; the third remained.

"Mine is a taxi, sir," he said. "Where do you wish to go?"

Connolly gave the number in Central Park West, permitted the driver to take his satchel, and followed the man across the pavement to the door of the taxicab.

Pausing there for an instant, he said:

"Do you think you can find your way through this fog, driver?"

"Surest thing you know," was the cheery reply.

"Well, it's up to you. If you can do it, go ahead."

The driver opened the door and Connolly leaped inside the vehicle. The door was slammed shut after him, and, as he dropped upon the seat, the taxicab started ahead on its journey to Central Park West.

They had gone possibly a couple of hundred feet before Connolly was conscious of the fact that he was not alone inside the taxicab. He had dropped down into one corner of the rather wide seat and did not discover the presence of another person at first, and, in fact, was not fully recovered from his surprise at the discovery until it turned the corner, as he supposed, into Fifth Avenue going north.

He made the discovery by leaning over toward the left side of the vehicle in an attempt to peer from that window, having already been unable to discern the buildings along the street through the one at his right.

In leaning forward, his hand fell upon the knees of another person, which he recognized instantly by reason of contact with the clothing to be a woman.

Startled, he withdrew his hand quickly and sat up straight and stiffly in his own corner. After a moment, he spoke:

"Pardon me," he said, "I was not aware that there was already a passenger in this cab."

There was no reply.

"Madam," he said again, "will you be so good as to tell me why you are here and where you would like to be taken? You see, I engaged this cab at the Grand Central Station, supposing it to be unoccupied. I regret that I intruded upon you, but I assure you that it was quite unintentional."

The woman did not reply by so much as the movement of a muscle.

"Madam!" Connolly called out sharply.

Absolute silence was his only answer, and for a moment he shivered with apprehension. Then he shrugged his shoulders and remained silent for a time, believing that possibly the woman was some night prowler who had entered the cab in the fog without the knowledge of the driver and who had fallen asleep there.

And so he permitted many minutes to pass, possibly fifteen of them, then he spoke again.

"Madam!" he said sharply the second time, and, reaching forward, he shook her rather energetically.

The result of this was horrifying.

Instead of awakening her, as he had evidently hoped to do, the disturbance brought about an entirely different result, for the body of the woman slid swiftly from the seat to the floor of the cab where it lay in a huddled mass at his feet.

"Just Heaven!" exclaimed Connolly, horrified, "the woman is dead."

She had fallen across his feet and against him, so that he had some difficulty in extricating himself in order to rise and call the attention of the driver, and it was actually necessary for him to raise her from the floor and deposit the body on the seat in front of him before he could do so.

Then he opened the cab door as being the quickest and surest way of attracting the attention of the driver, and called aloud to him:

"Driver! driver! Stop!"

The vehicle instantly came to a halt.

The driver leaped to the ground and came to the open door of the cab.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Matter! Great heavens, man! There's a dead woman in this cab!"

"A what?" called out the driver incredulously.

"A dead woman, I tell you. There's a dead woman in this cab. Strike a light if you've got one."

"Aw, what's the matter with you?" exclaimed the cabby. "What kind of a game are you trying to play on me, anyhow?"

"I tell you there's a dead woman in this cab. Strike a light and see for yourself."

In the meantime, Connolly was himself fumbling for his match-box, which he now produced, and in another instant a wax vesta was burning brightly in the interior of the taxicab.

As its light blazed forth both of the men uttered

simultaneous cries of horror, for there upon the seat where Connollly had placed her when he lifted her from the floor was indeed a dead woman.

As they looked upon her they could see no visible sign of the cause of death.

Her face, which was pretty rather than beautiful, was as composed as if she were sleeping, save only for the fact that her eyes were open and staring and that her jaws had relaxed when death came upon her.

But even in that short moment, while the wax vesta blazed up and gave them sufficient light to see, Connolly noticed the fact that she was undoubtedly a woman of education and refinement, and that she was scarcely out of her teens; certainly not many years beyond that.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE WITH THE OPEN DOOR.

Edward Connolly was a man who was not easily shaken out of his habitual repose of manner.

He was always one of the self-contained sort, cool in an emergency, cautious in the face of peril, deliberate in action when deliberation was required.

Nevertheless, it was with some effort that he controlled his excitement at that moment, for the whole circumstance was so strange and unprecedented as to be appalling as well as mystifying.

The driver of the taxicab seemed to be stupefied by the discovery.

Since the lighting of the wax vesta, he had not uttered a word, and even after the match went out, when Connolly spoke to him sharply, it was several seconds before he replied.

"How did that woman get inside this cab?" Connolly demanded, and the reply came slowly:

"I don't know, sir. I haven't the least idea."

Connolly had retreated outside the door by now and closed it after him.

"Did you know that she was in there when I engaged your cab?" he asked angrily.

"No, sir, as Heaven is my judge, I did not."

"Then how did she get in there at all?"

"I don't know, sir; I swear I don't know!"

"How long had you been standing there in front of the station when I engaged you?"

"More than an hour, sir."

"Were you near your cab all the time while it was waiting there?"

"I was close to it almost all of the time, sir."

"I asked you if you were there all of the time."

"No, sir; I left it alone there once."

"How long did you leave it alone?"

"Just so long, sir, as it took me to go down to Brandes' place to get a drink."

"Ten or fifteen minutes, then?"

"Maybe so, sir; certainly not longer."

"When was that? How long was it before I came out of the station?"

"I should think it was half an hour before that, sir."

"You didn't look inside your cab when you returned?"

"No, sir; the door wasn't opened till you engaged me."

"If you are telling me the truth, cabby——"

"I am, sir, s'help me."

"If you are telling me the truth, cabby, it follows that the woman must have entered the cab during your absence and that she did so in order to find a quiet place in which to kill herself."

"Do you think it a case of suicide, sir?"

"I don't know what else it can be, unless——"

"I was thinking of that, sir."

"Thinking of what?" demanded Connolly.

"Thinking that she might have been put inside there *after* she was dead; or that, perhaps, two might have entered the cab instead of one and that the other one left it after the deed was done."

"Why, that would be murder!" said Connolly.

"Yes, sir, so it would."

"I had not thought of that possibility."

"It seems to me the most likely one, sir."

"I didn't see any marks of violence about her, did you?" asked Connolly.

"No, sir, but I smelled them."

"Eh? What do you mean by that?"

"I had a suicide once in a hansom cab, sir, who took prussic acid. I have never forgotten the smell of it. I thought I smelled it in there just now. It's funny that you didn't smell it also, sir."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Connolly, "I think I did smell it. The odor of bitter almonds, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir; that's it."

"Well, doesn't that uphold my theory of suicide?"

"Perhaps, sir; I suppose it does, after all."

"Well, cabby, the thing for us to do now is to find a station-house."

"Yes, sir; that's right, sir."

Connolly looked about him into the fog and shuddered.

"Do you know where there is one?" he asked.

"No, sir; to tell you the truth I do not."

"Do you know where we are at the present moment?"

"No, sir, I don't; and that's a fact."

"Didn't you turn up Fifth Avenue at Forty-second Street?"

"Yes, sir, it was my intention to go to Fifty-ninth Street, and thence across to Columbus Circle, but I turned long before I got there, I think, and since then I have been wandering about trying to find my way. I have shaved the curb half a dozen times with the wheels of the cab, and I have turned back into the middle of the street and zigzagged and probably turned corners as well without knowing it until at the present moment I don't know north from south or east from west, and I haven't any more idea where we are than the man in the moon."

Connolly muttered something which was not audible to the driver, and which it is not necessary to repeat here.

"We're in a nice fix," he exclaimed crossly. "What under the sun are we going to do?"

"I don't know, sir, unless we wait for the fog to lift."

"Can't you find Central Park West?"

"I couldn't find a million dollars if I knew it was on the next corner. I don't know which way a corner is from here. I was just going to stop the cab and speak to you when you called."

Connolly was silent for a time, turning the strange predicament in which he found himself over in his mind, and at last he said:

"Here, driver; you take this box of vestas and light one and hold it so that I can see what I am about. Take several of them in your hand and light one after another until I tell you to stop. I want to have another look at that dead woman."

He opened the door of the cab and entered it, while the driver leaned inside holding a lighted vesta in his fingers.

There was nothing, however, to be discovered save what they had already seen, and, telling the driver that he need light no more of the vestas, Connolly stepped out of the cab again upon the pavement.

"She was a woman who is not much more than twenty years old, if that," he said to the driver. "She was a lady, too. You can see that with half an eye. This is a horrible situation to be placed in, cabby. Can't you think of something that we can do? Don't you suppose that we can find a station-house somewhere around here or even a policeman?"

"I tell you, sir, I can't find anything. I suppose, however, we might set up a yell and, perhaps, attract some one to us."

"A lot of good that would do," said Connolly contemptuously.

"I don't much like the idea myself, sir. We might succeed in calling some one we didn't want and get ourselves in trouble."

"Trouble! Good Heaven, aren't we in trouble enough now?"

"Yes, sir; quite so, sir."

"Well, anyhow, cabby, we're in the City of New York, and we're on one of the streets of the city. It's true that it's rather late at night, but I'm going to find a house, ring the bell, and wake up the people inside of it. That, at least, will tell us where we are, and more than likely they will have a telephone. In that way I can communicate with police headquarters and tell them what has happened and where we can be found."

"That's a bully good idea, sir," said the driver.

"Well, you stay here beside your cab," said Connolly, "and amuse yourself by whistling so I can hear you, and in order that I will know where to find you when I want to return. What's your name?"

"Jim Hardy, sir."

"Well, Jim, you whistle all the tunes you know, one after another, or, better still, listen for my call. I won't go far. I can surely find a house close by."

Connolly started away then slowly, and with exceeding caution sliding his feet along the pavement as he proceeded in order that he would not stumble over any impediment that might be in his way.

He counted his steps, too, as he went along, and when he had gone a distance, which he supposed should have taken him across any of the wider streets of New York and still had not found the curb, he concluded that he had been following directly down the middle of the thoroughfare, and so turned at right angles and went onward again.

Even then he traveled a distance which he knew would have taken him twice across the street, and still had discovered no curbstone, and he halted in his tracks greatly puzzled by the circumstance.

Presently, however, he smiled grimly to himself, believing he had found an explanation of the riddle.

The explanation he thought he had found was this:

He believed that he had walked through the middle of the street from the spot where he left the cab directly to the intersection of two streets, and that in

turning at right angles he had merely walked along the middle of another thoroughfare.

He made another turn at right angles and went forward again as cautiously as before; and this time he was not long in discovering the curb he had so vainly sought.

He placed his foot upon it, crossed the sidewalk gingerly with his hands outstretched before him, and presently uttered a low exclamation of satisfaction when one of them rested upon the post of a balustrade. Feeling with his feet, he presently found the lowest of the steps adjoining, and, guiding himself on the balustrade upon which his hand now rested, he went up the steps to the door of the house.

Still feeling with his hands because he could see nothing at all, he discovered that half of the vestibule door stood open, and then thinking that, perhaps, one of his wax vestas would assist him in locating the bell which he wished to ring, he lighted it and held it out before him.

To his amazement not only was half of the vestibule door standing ajar, but the door beyond it which gave entrance to the house itself was also swinging open.

"That's odd," he muttered to himself; and then as he was about to continue his search for the door-bell, he heard a cry from the interior of the house which startled him into rigid immobility.

CHAPTER IV.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH.

Remember the fact that Edward Connolly had not the least idea where he was at that moment. Remember also that he was an athlete, a man of courage, chivalrous by instinct and ever ready to go to the assistance of another, more particularly if that other, who needed assistance, happened to be a woman.

It was a woman's cry that he heard proceeding from the interior of the house; but whether it was one of terror or of anger; whether it was a call for help or otherwise, he could not at the moment determine.

It was not repeated. It came to him only once, and for an instant he stood on the door-step undecided what to do; whether to enter the house unannounced and to discover for himself what was taking place there or to step farther back and ring the door-bell continuously until he should bring some one to him.

He could not explain to Nick Carter when he told the story just what incentive it was that prompted him to pass inside the house without ringing the bell, but that is what he did do.

The hallway was in absolute darkness, and the dampness of the fog had penetrated even there.

He felt his way forward along the hall with his fingers in contact with the partition at his left, and presently he touched a door which was closed, and, as he presently discovered, locked.

Perceiving this, he passed on down the hall, for it was his belief that the cry he had heard came from the rear of the house on that floor.

After a little he found a second door, but this was also locked against him, and, although he tried it several times, it would not open to his touch.

Again he passed on, and so presently came to the end of the hallway where there was a third door, and just as his fingers rested upon the knob which he was about to turn, a second cry, this time of unmistakable terror, came to him from the interior of the room beyond.

Convinced now that something was taking place in that room which demanded his interference, he wrenched at the door-knob, and, when the door itself resisted him, threw himself bodily against it, at the same time calling out loudly:

"What's the matter? What's going on in there?"

The door resisted his assault upon it, and he hurled himself against it the second time and then a third time, calling out for those inside to open it as he did so.

Then as he made the fourth repetition of his effort against it, the door gave way before him, but, having been unlocked and pulled open from the inside just as he threw himself forward, the result was that he stumbled and fell sprawling upon his hands and knees and in the full glare of an electric light, and, before he could recover himself or even make an attempt to gain an upright position, several persons who were in that room precipitated themselves upon him, and he was borne downward flat upon his face on the floor so that he could see nothing.

More than that, the men who had attacked him seized him at different parts of his body, and, although he struggled mightily, he soon discovered that he was entirely helpless in their grasp.

But Connolly was not one of the kind that gives up easily. On the instant of entering the room he had had one glance around it, which had not endured for more than a fraction of a second; but even in that brief interval he had noticed that there were five persons there, three men and two women; that the three

men and one of the women were on their feet advancing toward him to make the attack, and that the other woman was seated upon a chair that had been drawn almost to the center of the room. That was all he saw.

Nevertheless, he continued to fight for his liberty.

He realized even in that moment of excitement that he had walked in upon a scene at which spectators were not desired.

He knew that, unwittingly, he had fallen upon the actual commission of some sort of a crime, and he had no doubt that the woman in the chair was the victim of it; was the one who had uttered the two cries he had heard since he ascended the steps at the front of the house.

Connolly was a strong man, and he believed that he was fighting for his life at that moment.

Somehow he succeeded presently in getting his feet under him again, and, although one of the three men was clinging to his back and choking him, and, although the other two were still clinging to him to pull him down again, he wrenched himself free for an instant and struck one of them a stinging blow under the ear which felled him to the floor senseless.

But another of his assailants had seized upon some article of offensive use, and with it now struck Connolly a terrific blow upon the forehead which sent him reeling backward, and under which he stumbled to the floor again unconscious.

People never realize how long a time unconsciousness lasts.

It might have been less than a minute, or it might have been many minutes before Connolly was again cognizant of what was taking place around him.

He recovered slowly as men do on such occasions, and with a dazed perception as to where he was and what had happened.

He tried to move but only to discover that it was impossible; and he awoke to a realizing sense of his situation and to a complete return of memory with the knowledge that he was bound hand and foot, stretched upon his back on the floor, and that something had been thrown over his face which effectually prevented him from seeing anything that was going on around him.

But he could hear if he could not see.

Voices were murmuring in the room, in low tones, to be sure, but, nevertheless, distinctly audible to Connolly, who could hear every word that was uttered.

He noticed even at that moment that one of the voices, a man's, was peculiarly soft and resonant as if its owner might be a singer; at least, his voice suggested it.

Another of the masculine voices was deep and heavy and gruff, and there was also a tone of mastery about it as if he were the leader of the group; as if his was the individuality that had to be obeyed.

The third of the masculine voices was a nervous one; it suggested a young man of vacillating character, who was not sure of himself or of anything else.

Mingling with those voices was that of a woman—doubtless the woman who had been upon her feet when Connolly so precipitously entered that room—it was a contralto in pitch, a decidedly self-confident masterly voice for a woman to possess.

And these were the only voices Connolly heard at first. If the woman in the chair was still conscious she did not make the fact evident by speaking.

Beyond that first effort to move that Connolly made when unconsciousness returned to him, he gave no sign whatever that he was cognizant of his surroundings, and it was evident that his assailants were paying no attention to him whatever and were not aware of the fact that he had recovered.

The conversation he overheard was in French, but Connolly had spent more than a year of his absence from home in Paris, and was almost as conversant with the language as with his own.

It was only a moment after he began listening to their conversation before he discovered that he was himself the subject of it. The four were trying to determine what should be done with him.

"I am positive," said the man who seemed to be in control of the situation, "that he wandered in here quite accidentally. Then, as he entered the hallway, he heard Yvonne's cry. Naturally he rushed to her assistance."

"But the open door? What of that?" asked the voice which Connolly thought belonged to the youth.

"I think that Armande must have left it open."

"Well, what shall we do with this fellow?" demanded the voice of the singer, and the woman replied in a tone which was a menace of itself:

"Do with him as we have done with others. Serve him as we have already served Adrienne and as we will presently serve Yvonne."

A shuddering sob from the woman in the chair was the first indication Connolly received that he was still alive.

"It is only a question of another dose," the woman went on, "and if he is dead he will have no tales to tell."

"No, Natalie," said the voice of the leader, in a decided tone, "it would too greatly complicate matters to do that. His body must not be found in this house. If you are intent upon taking the fellow's life you must carry him out in the street somewhere and do it there, the fog will conceal whatever you wish to do."

CHAPTER V.

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

During the time that Connolly was lying in the position described he had not been idle, although he made no move which the other people in the room would have discovered had they been observing him.

It has been said that something was thrown over his face to prevent him from seeing, and this something Connolly presently decided was a towel.

He knew that from the texture of it when he touched it with his tongue; and, in doing that, an idea occurred to him upon which he proceeded to act without delay. Stretched upon his back as he was, with his hands bound together at the wrist and with cord so tightly drawn about his ankles that they impeded the circulation of his blood and benumbed his feet, he still had the use of his tongue, and now he began to work it with all the power he could use, and to his infinite satisfaction he presently discovered that he was succeeding in moving the towel slowly across his face.

He felt that if he persisted he would succeed presently in pushing it so far aside so that he would be able to see the persons in that room with him, and so, while he listened to their conversation, he continued to work with that member.

It was at that time that one of the party, he could not tell which one, approached him, and Connolly quickly closed his eyes and with an effort held his breath while the towel was lifted from his face for an interval.

Then he heard the soft voice of the singer remark directly above him:

"The man is still unconscious. We needn't worry about him for the present."

The towel was replaced and the man returned to his chair at the other side of the room, but now, when the conversation was resumed, it was in a language of which Connolly did not understand a word.

He knew that the subject was an important one, too, by the eagerness with which it was discussed.

Although he could not see the people in the room, he could imagine that they were seated facing each other with their heads quite close together, and that they were going over in detail the arrangement of their plans.

He did not even know what the language was, although there was a vague idea in his mind that it might be Russian or Polish or even Magyar; he was not sufficient familiar with any of them to determine.

During the conversation he had already listened to and that which was now taking place, he observed two names of which he took mental note.

He already had jotted down the name of Natalie as belonging to the woman with the contralto voice, and of Adrienne as belonging to some person who was not present at the moment, and of Yvonne as the name of the woman in the chair; now he gathered that the apparent leader among these people was called Pierre, and that the man with the singing voice was Jules. And the name of the youth had not yet been mentioned.

In replacing the towel over Connolly's face, Jules had been somewhat careless, and, when the conversation was resumed at the other side of the room, Connolly recommenced his efforts to move it with his tongue, and succeeded so far beyond his expectations that in a very few moments he had uncovered one of his eyes entirely.

But even then he was doomed to disappointment.

His position was such that he could see nothing whatever of the four persons who were conversing together so interestedly; but he could see quite plainly the face of Yvonne, whom he now discovered was confined to the chair upon which she sat, held there by a silken sash which was tied around her body and thence around the back of the chair.

It was an upholstered chair of plush, neat and soft, and Yvonne was resting her head against the back of it with her eyes closed, and with the most pathetically sorrowful expression of utter despair on her face that Connolly remembered ever to have seen.

The fact that she was breathing was apparent, but it was the only sign of consciousness that she gave.

His vision, as developed by the use of that one uncovered eye, comprehended only that part of the room which was located to the right of him, and, therefore, upon Yvonne's left. The other four persons were at the opposite side of the apartment where he was unable to see nothing at all.

But he took in every detail of that part of the room that he could see. He noticed the pictures on the walls, the ornaments on the mantel, the furniture

and the frescoed ceiling, the woodwork and the drapery curtains at a bay window that came under his observation.

He paid no more attention to the conversation that was going on since he could understand no word of it, and gave all his efforts to taking in all possible detail about the room that he could, in order that he would have some means of remembering it and describing it later on if it should happen that these assassins permitted him to live.

Presently his eye traveled back again to the face of Yvonne, and he almost gasped with pleased surprise when he noticed that her eyes were open and that she was staring directly at him.

For a moment they gazed steadily upon each other, he with his one uncovered eye, and again he took the chance of revealing the fact that he was conscious by straining at his bonds in an effort to release himself.

The effort was unavailing, however.

He knew even before he made the second attempt that he could not hope to free himself, and so he desisted.

How passionately he wished at that moment that he could leap to his feet and once more undertake a combat against the four assassins in that room, no words can describe.

Yvonne's hands were free if Connolly's were not.

He saw her glance across the room toward the others, and then she attempted to make signs to him by which he understood that she was beseeching him to make some effort to save her.

Alas! that he could not do. He was as helpless as she was, more so in fact, and he was not even able to make returning signs by which he would have directed her at least to make a break for liberty since nothing held her where she was save only the silk sash that was tied around her body.

But she continued to make other signs which Connolly could not read or understand, and, in doing so, she became too vehement so that presently the loud-voiced man called Pierre started to his feet with an exclamation of rage and rushed toward her and slapped her face brutally with his open hand when he reached her.

She cried out at this, but the man laughed coarsely, and on the instant turned upon Connolly to whom he administered a forceful kick.

"So you've come around, have you?" he said hoarsely, but in perfect English. "Making signs across the room, are you?"

But even as he spoke he snatched at the towel and drew it again across Connolly's face, and did it so quickly that his own features had not been for an instant visible.

The man administered two or three more kicks which were exceedingly painful to bear, and then with a coarse laugh he turned to the others reverting to that unintelligible language; and presently he left the room, slamming the door after him, to return shortly, this time to address whatever remarks he made to Yvonne.

Whatever it was he said Connolly could not understand, but Yvonne replied in French to every remark he made. It was like listening to one side of a conversation over a telephone, and, if you have ever done that, you will understand how little can be comprehended from it.

But Connolly nevertheless gathered that they were attempting to force her to sign some paper or document, and that she was firmly refusing to do so.

He knew from her replies that they were offering to spare her life if she would sign, and he also knew that she did not in the least believe them, because she cried out several times in French:

"I will not sign. I do not believe your promises. After I did sign you would murder me just the same."

Presently Connolly was conscious of the fact that the woman called Natalie had crossed the room until she also was near Yvonne.

He judged from what she said that she held something between her fingers, probably a vial, since he heard her exclaim in French:

"See, I have only to force your lips apart and to drop a very small quantity between them and you instantly cease to live. Sign and we will spare you."

"I do not believe you. I will not sign!" Yvonne cried out; and it was at that instant that Connolly determined to interfere.

"Sign it whatever it is, Yvonne, and take your chances. They will kill you if you do not," he called out to her from beneath the towel which covered his face; and, even as he spoke, he heard something very like a growl from the lips of the big man. He heard him take quick strides across the room, and the next instant he received a blow with a heavy instrument on the same spot where the other one had been dealt him, and for the second time that night consciousness left him.

But even as it did leave him he heard a scream of utter agony from Yvonne, and the voice of Natalie following it cried out, this time in English:

"Then take it, you jade, and die. We'll have your fortune anyway without your signature."

That was the last that Connolly knew about what took place within that house of mystery.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY GROWS DEEPER.

Such is the story that Edward Connolly related to Nick Carter after his bath and while they smoked together in the study of the detective's house.

"But you haven't told me how you escaped from the house," said the detective, when Connolly had completed his tale.

"I haven't told you because I don't know how I did escape," Connolly replied.

"Where were you when you came to your senses again?"

Connolly hesitated so long before he replied that Nick Carter repeated the question; then he said:

"Nick, I am almost afraid to tell you for fear that you will not believe."

"Why, of course, I'll believe," said the detective.

"Very well, then, listen. When I came to my senses I was in some kind of a vehicle which I later discovered to be a taxicab. There were two other persons inside the cab with me, one of whom was smoking a cigarette. The other person was absolutely silent and motionless, and for a very good reason as I later discovered. She was dead."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Nick.

"It is true," insisted Connolly, "but I did not know it at the time consciousness did return to me."

"Just as it had done before?"

"It came back slowly, and as I did on the other occasion, I kept silent and motionless in order to conceal the fact that I was again cognizant of my surroundings.

"I think that the man who was smoking the cigarette was just on the point of leaving me at the time I became aware of my surroundings, for not more than a minute or two elapsed after that before I heard him open the door of the conveyance, and the next instant he had passed outside, leaving the cab door swinging open behind him."

"Do you mean that he went away and left you like that?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"And then what did you do next?"

"I kept still. I did not yet know who the other person in the cab might be. I was only aware of her presence by the fact that my knee touched hers. I did not even know that it was a woman—then."

"Well, go on."

"I must have remained there perfectly motionless and silent for at least ten minutes before I dared attempt to move."

"Why?"

"Well, for one reason I still had the idea that the cords were about my wrist and ankles. My hands were lying one above the other, my feet were crossed together, and so deeply had the cords imbedded themselves in my flesh while they were still upon me that the impression of their presence remained. I did not know that I had been unbound."

"I can understand that quite well," said Nick.

"Presently, however, I moved my hands and discovered that they had been released. Then I tried the same thing with my feet to make the second discovery. Then I worked my fingers, and, although I was still weak from the effects of the blow I had received, I decided that I could put up a fairly good fight if need be, and I spoke out.

"'Who are you?' I demanded of the person who sat opposite to me.

"There was no reply, and with shuddering horror I remembered my previous experience in a taxicab, and wondered if I was again in the same place with the body of the dead woman. I even wondered if it were the same driver I had had before who had just left me."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I remembered my vestas and thrust my hand into my pocket and found the box that held them. I produced them and lighted one."

Connolly leaned forward toward Nick, and said in a subdued voice that was almost a whisper:

"Nick, the person who was opposite me in that cab was Yvonne, and she was dead."

"Great heavens, man!" exclaimed the detective. "You have certainly had experience enough for one night."

"I can't begin to describe to you, Nick, the effect that that discovery had upon me. It drove me out of my senses temporarily. It almost crazed me. I did not know what to do. I leaned forward and spoke to her. I called her by name, although even then I knew that she was dead.

"Then terror seized upon me. I was suddenly fearful lest the man who was smoking the cigarette had left

me only temporarily and would personally return. I started to my feet in the cab, but only to strike my head against the roof of it and to fall back again upon the seat, but, as I did so, my right hand came in contact—with this!"

He reached out for his discarded clothing which had been placed upon a chair in the study, and from the inside pocket of the coat produced a Venetian dagger with an eight-inch blade sharpened at both edges.

"Where did you find that?" asked the detective.

For the first time since their interview Connolly smiled.

"I don't know whether the man who made use of it intended to kill me with it, or if he only made pretense of doing so," he replied. "At all events the dagger was thrust through the left side of my coat, waistcoat, and shirt, and I did not discover until I was in the bathroom just now that I was wounded very slightly along that side of my body. Shall I tell you what I think of it?"

"Yes," said the detective.

"I think that that young chap with the weak voice, who was in the house where Yvonne was killed, was the one who was smoking the cigarette in the cab. I think those men had compelled him to enter the cab with me and with the body of Yvonne, and that his instructions were to stab me to death before he left me, and I think he had not the courage to do it."

"Why didn't they poison you with the prussic acid as they did Yvonne, I wonder?" asked Nick.

"Probably they had no more of it to use," suggested Connolly.

"A drop of it would have sufficed."

"Yes, I know that, but they may have used the last drop they had on Yvonne."

"Well, go on, Ned, what did you do then?"

"I think I almost lost consciousness again because of the very horror of my surroundings. I'm not sure as to that, but I know that presently I somehow got outside the cab, still holding the dagger in my hands, and I discovered, then, that the vehicle was deserted and that the fog was still about me so thickly that there was no possibility of determining where I was."

"Well?"

"Nick, I turned and ran. I ran like a coward, and I ran on and on until I collided with some obstacle, a lamp-post, I think it was, that hurled me to the pavement.

"Then I got up again and rushed onward a second time until breathless with my exertions, and from the terror under which I had labored I reduced my pace to a walk, and then to aimless wandering—and then I found you."

"Ned," said the detective, after a moment's pause, "you have had the most astonishing experiences this night that were ever heard of."

"I believe you," said Connolly.

"Twice to-night you have been in different cabs with a dead woman."

Connolly shuddered.

"I wonder," said the detective musingly, "if the two have any connection with each other?"

"That is what I have been asking myself ever since it happened," said Connolly.

"You saw the faces of both women?"

"Yes, distinctly."

"Were they alike; did they resemble each other?"

"Not at all I should say; but remember that I saw them very imperfectly."

"You saw Yvonne plainly enough?"

"Yes, while I was in the room."

"And they did not at all suggest each other to you?"

"No, Nick; I don't think so."

"Both were killed with prussic acid?"

"Yes, I know that, or, at least, I believe it."

"The conversation you overheard in that room indicated that there was another woman who had been foully dealt with?"

"Yes, one who was spoken of as Adrienne."

"It is to be regretted that you could not understand all the conversation that took place there."

"It is even more to be regretted, Nick, that I have no idea where that house is located."

"Oh, I think we can locate the house," replied the detective.

"You do! How?"

"You have the name of the driver of the taxicab

that took you away from the Grand Central Station, Ned."

"Yes; Jim Hardy."

"Well, we can find him again."

"What good will that do?"

"Didn't he tell you that he was going to remain right where you left him until the fog lifted? Well, if he did that he will know where he was when you left him."

"That is true."

"And we are pretty certain that after you left him you went as far as a near-by corner and turned into another street before you found the house where Yvonne was killed."

"Yes."

"Do you remember which way you turned when you entered that second street? Do you remember if you turned to the right or left?"

"I turned to the left. Every turn I made on that occasion was to the left."

"Well, in that case, our search, after we have found Hardy, will be reduced to a very simple proposition."

"How so?"

"If he knows the location of his cab when you left him we have only to go in each direction from the point where you left it and turn to the left in each of the streets, making a house-to-house search on the left side of each of those streets for a short distance in them."

"All that sounds very easy, Nick, but I think you will find it quite difficult."

"We'll find the house, all right, if we can find Hardy and he knows where the cab was when you left it."

"And Nick, will you assist me in uncovering this mystery?"

"I certainly will, Ned, and for more reasons than one."

"Why? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I have every reason to believe that the case you fell in with so unwittingly this night is the same one which earlier in the evening I was discussing with Monsieur Gereaux, chief of the secret police of Paris."

CHAPTER VII.

THE POISONED CANDY.

The reaction caused by the scenes through which Connolly had passed placed him on his back in bed, and when Nick Carter visited the room to which he had assigned him, at ten o'clock the following morning, he found that his friend was too ill to rise, and he summoned a physician to attend upon him.

This fact left the detective without the assistance he had counted upon in ferreting out the secrets that surrounded the house of mystery.

The case was not like any other Nick Carter had ever had to deal with.

In fact, the average person would say that he was not called upon to investigate it, and that the whole circumstance was so strange and uncanny that he should have attempted to do nothing with it, at least until there were further developments.

But further developments were not long in coming.

The incidents of the night had happened too late for any narration of them to find its way into the morning papers; and, furthermore, the dense fog had not lifted and so unveiled the city from its hideous cloak until the sun rose in the morning to dispel it.

But by a little after ten o'clock that morning, extras were on the street and newsboys were shouting the information in the most startling phrases they could invent to the effect that the bodies of two women had been found in separate taxicabs in two widely separated sections of the city.

Nick Carter left his house about half-past ten, and he took his way directly to the taxicab company's offices where he inquired for the manager.

"I have come to ask you some questions about those dead women in your cabs," he told him. "I suppose that already you have been besieged by reporters, but I am Nick Carter, the detective, and I have a personal interest in this matter which I need not explain to you."

"Very well, sir," replied the manager, "I shall be glad to give you all the information I possess, although I must assure you before I begin that it amounts to very little."

"First," said Nick, "have you a driver in your employ named James Hardy?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter, we have. Hardy is here in the building now, too; but I should tell you before we go any further in this discussion that the other cab, the one in which the body of the other woman was found, belongs to a different company. I suppose that you are aware of the fact that there are two companies in New York?"

"Quite so."

"Shall I call Hardy?"

"I would prefer first that you tell me what you know regarding the circumstances, Mr. Horton."

"Well," replied the manager, "all I know about Hardy's adventure is this: He was standing in the fog in front of the Grand Central Station when a passenger, who came off the train from Montreal, engaged his services. Hardy was to drive him to a house in Central Park West."

"Yes," said Nick.

"The passenger entered the cab, and Hardy had gone some distance when the man opened the door and yelled to him to stop. He did so. The man had discovered a dead woman in the cab with him. Hardy had left his cab in front of the station for a few moments while he went to get a drink, as he has confessed to me, and the presumption is that during the time he was absent the woman entered the cab and committed suicide with prussic acid."

"Is that the theory the police have adopted?" asked the detective.

"It is."

"Why?"

"Why? Because there is no other reason to assume."

"I suppose you are convinced of that, Mr. Horton?"

"I certainly am. I see no other premises that would be tenable."

"May not two have entered the cab during the driver's absence to wait his return?"

"Oh, yes, or a dozen for that matter if they could crowd inside," replied the manager, with some contempt.

"And would it not be possible if two had entered there that in the dark one of them might have forced a few drops of the acid between the lips of the other?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Most anything is possible."

"Where did Hardy take the body of the dead woman before the matter was reported to the police?"

"He brought it here."

"Instead of going to the station-house?"

"Yes."

"Why did he do that?"

"I suppose because he regarded it as his duty."

"Do you so regard it?"

"I quite approved of what he did."

"Was the cab searched before it was taken to the police-station?"

"The cab was not taken to the police-station at all. I telephoned from here to the captain. He came around here himself and brought two men with him. The coroner was summoned, and as there were no identification marks upon the body it was sent to the morgue."

"Directly from here?"

"Yes."

"I return now to my previous question. Was the cab searched?"

"Assuredly, Mr. Carter."

"What was found inside of it?"

"A purse evidently belonging to the woman and which contained a small sum of money; between four and five dollars, I believe. There was also a handkerchief and a partly emptied box of chocolate creams."

"Chocolate creams!" exclaimed the detective. "What has become of that box of candy?"

"I have it here," said the manager, "or, rather, what is left of it."

The detective started to his feet.

"Do you mean to tell me that persons here have dared to eat any of that candy?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you that the woman might have come to her death by eating one of those chocolate creams into which several drops of prussic acid might have been placed?"

"Great heavens, Mr. Carter! I haven't thought of that."

"Who has eaten the candy?"

"I have eaten two or three pieces of it myself. The rest of it is over there on the table beside my typewriter. I think she is finishing the box."

Nick took two strides across the floor and seized the wrist of the young woman typewriter just as she was in the act of conveying to her mouth the last one but three of the chocolate-drops, and he tore it from her grasp and seized with the other hand the now almost emptied box.

She exclaimed indignantly at his action, but he paid no attention whatever to her, returning to the manager with the box containing the three chocolate creams in one hand and the fourth one, the one which the young woman was about to eat, in his other hand.

He resumed his seat and examined the fourth piece of candy attentively, and when he raised his eyes again to the manager, his face was grave indeed.

"That was a narrow escape, Mr. Horton," he said.

"Why? What do you mean?" exclaimed the manager.

For reply Nick Carter held out the chocolate cream that he had taken from the young woman's hand. It showed plainly where it had been cut in two by some sharp instrument and then stuck together again by placing the two halves of it together.

"Unless I am greatly mistaken," he said, "this chocolate cream which your young woman typewriter was about to consume contains poison. You can see for yourself that it has been cut in half and put together again. Doubtless there were two of them in the box, and it is a mercy that either you or that young woman were not dead when I arrived here."

"It is horrible!" said the manager.

"I wonder," said Nick, with some irony in his voice, "that a man of your experience would eat candy that was found in such a manner as this was."

"But you don't know that any of it is poison."

"At least, Mr. Horton, I haven't any doubt of it, and before I am many hours older I shall have determined definitely whether it is or not. Now, if you will be so good I would like you to tell me what else was found in that cab."

"Nothing. That was all."

"What kind of a handkerchief was it that was found there?"

"Oh, just an ordinary handkerchief. Something like this one," and he flittered his own from his pocket.

"Do you mean that it was a man's handkerchief?"

"Yes."

"Where is it now?"

"It was sent to the morgue with the body, as all such articles are, to assist in identification."

"Can you describe it to me?"

"No more than I have already done."

"Were there any marks upon it?"

"I don't think so. I am not aware of any."

"What was its condition?"

"I don't know what you mean by that question."

"Well, was it clean; was it wadded into a ball or was it folded flat or did it look as if it had been used for any particular purpose?"

"Oh, as to that my recollection is that it was strung out straight from opposite corners in something after the manner you would arrange a handkerchief if you wish to blindfold a person."

"I see. Now, if you will call Hardy, I would like to ask him some questions."

The manager left the room, but returned presently accompanied by Hardy.

"James," said the detective, "do you remember the place where your passenger, whom you picked up at Grand Central Station, left you last night after he had discovered the body of the woman in your cab?"

"I remember when he left me, if that is what you mean, sir."

"Don't you know where you were when he left you?"

"No, sir; I do not."

"Why not? Didn't you stay there until the fog lifted?"

"You bet your life I did not, sir. When he didn't come back I was kind o' leary about hanging around there with a dead woman in my cab, and I got on my box again and drove away."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE BODIES.

Nick Carter knew more about the incidents of the preceding night so far as James Hardy, the driver, was concerned, than Hardy himself. Of that we are fully aware, but the detective did not think it necessary to inform the driver of it.

"Tell me," he said, "exactly what happened to you, and what you did after your passenger left you in the fog where he did?"

"Well, sir," replied Hardy, "it was this way: He was for finding a station-house to which we could take the body of the woman, but, sir, it wasn't possible to find anything in that awful fog. I never saw the like of it before outside of the city of London, where I lived when I was a boy."

"Well, go on."

"He said he would find a house somewhere and wake up the people so as to get our location, and that if they had a telephone he would communicate with police headquarters explaining what had happened and tell them where we could be found, but, all the same, Mr. Carter, they couldn't 'a' found us any more than we could find them."

"That is true, Hardy. What else?"

"I was to whistle or sing or do something and to answer him when he called so that he could locate me when he returned, and I did keep whistling constantly after he left me, but between you and me I did it more for company's sake than for any other reason."

"I haven't a doubt of it," said Nick.

"It was pretty gruesome, sir, standing there in that fog with only a blank wall around me and a dead woman in my cab. I know I don't want another experience of the kind over again."

"And so I suppose you got rattled, didn't you?"

"Rattled ain't no name for it, sir. I just kept getting more and more afraid every minute of the time, and I tell you right now every second seemed like an hour. I kept expecting that that dead woman would jump out and yell. But I stood it as long as I could, until I got to the point where I couldn't bear it any longer, then I jumped upon the box, threw in the clutch, and started forward."

"Where did you go?"

"I haven't any more idea of that, sir, than you have. I ran into the curb two or three times, and, of course, backed away from it. Once the fog thinned out for about half a minute so that I saw a street opening, and I turned into it for no particular reason except that it had the appearance of going somewhere; and I kept on running into curbs and turning and twisting and going this way and that for about another hour, I should suppose, before I stopped again to stay stopped. I don't know how long it was after that before the fog began to lift, but it seemed about a week to me. Then I discovered that I was near a corner, so I climbed up a lamp-post and found that I was only three blocks away from this garage. After that I lost no time in getting here. That, sir, is all I know about it."

"You do not even know the name of the man who was your passenger?" asked Nick, hoping that the man did not.

"No, sir; I haven't the least idea who he was."

"What became of his satchel? He had one with him, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir, he did. I plumb forgot all about that. I took it on the box with me when he got inside the cab at the Grand Central Station, and when I got to the garage it wasn't there. It must have fallen off into the street somewhere and been lost."

There was nothing more that this man could tell him, Nick decided, and a few moments later he left that garage and took his way to the other one where as before he found the manager and presently had him in private conversation.

He explained who he was and why he was there, and stated that he would like all the particulars that were procurable about the incident of finding the dead woman in the cab.

"I know no more about it than you do, Mr. Carter," replied the manager. "So far as we are concerned, our case is like this:

"The driver of that taxicab is a new man in our employ, and rather an unexperienced one. Last eve-

ning when the fog came down upon us it wasn't long before he entirely lost his bearings, and, being young, he became frightened, and the result of his fright was that he left his taxicab standing against the curb and wandered away along the street himself in search of a saloon or some place where he could enter and wait until the fog lifted.

"He tells me that he wandered around for a long time without finding any place, and became so thoroughly lost that he did not even know the way back to his cab; that after that he wandered on and on possibly for an hour or more, and finally did succeed in entering a saloon which proved to be on Third Avenue near Fifty-second Street. He remained there all night and did not report here until after daylight this morning, and, therefore, not until after his cab with its dead passenger inside had been found by the police."

"Did the police report their discovery to you at once?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir; almost at once. They desired, of course, to know who the driver of the cab was. He is at the station-house now under arrest, although the police are inclined to think as they did in the other case, that this is also suicide."

"Your driver surely ought to know how that body got into the cab. Where was the cab standing at the time your driver abandoned it?"

"He doesn't know, sir; that is, he doesn't know positively."

"Well, has he any approximate idea about it?"

"He thinks, although he is not sure, that he was on Fifth Avenue, and he is quite positive that he was somewhere between Forty-second and Fifty-ninth Streets. But he had been traveling considerably since the fog dropped down, and had lost his bearings. He is not sure that he did not turn into one of the side streets."

"Is that the best he can do about remembering where he was?"

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Carter."

"Do you know what, if anything, was found inside the cab besides the dead woman?"

"There were several pieces of severed cord that had been cut through with a sharp knife and which looked as if they had been used to bind her, but I was told that there was no indication on her wrist or ankles that she had been so treated."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Are you quite certain that you got all the information out of the driver that he possessed?"

"I am entirely certain of it."

"You don't believe that that woman was put into the cab with his knowledge?"

"No, sir; I have no such idea."

"How, then, do you suppose she did get there? What is your theory about it?"

"My theory is either she found the abandoned cab and there being nobody near it she entered it and afterward took her own life; or, if it is a case of murder, that her assassin in attempting to dispose of the body discovered the abandoned cab and made use of it."

"The body of the woman has, of course, been sent to the morgue, I suppose?"

"I believe so; yes, sir."

The detective entered his automobile and was driven to the morgue, where he presently stood in silent contemplation of the two bodies which had been placed upon slabs that were side by side. He drew the sheets back exposing their faces and looked from one to the other studiously, but, as Connolly had declared, he could find very little resemblance between them.

He had inquired upon entering the place which body had come from the red cab and which from the green one, and so he knew which was Adrienne and which was the supposed Yvonne.

We say the supposed Yvonne for the reason that Nick Carter was by no means positive as yet that the other woman was the Yvonne the woman referred to in the conversation overheard by Connolly in the house of mystery.

Yet it was a safe presumption that she was, inasmuch as they had been killed by the same kind of poison and their bodies had been disposed of in the same manner.

It was almost as if the assassins had foreseen the

advent of the strange fog, and had planned their own actions accordingly.

He asked and was permitted to examine the clothing of the two women, and was not surprised to discover that there were no identifying marks upon any of it; not even laundry-marks. In fact, every article of clothing that had belonged to them was new. It suggested that the assassins had prepared them for the fates they were to meet.

From the morgue he telephoned to Patsy to hasten there and to stand on guard near the two bodies in order that he might closely observe all persons who came to view them; and these were many, because of the unusual circumstances surrounding the two fatalities.

He waited there himself until Patsy arrived and then he took himself again to the club where he had left Monsieur Gereaux.

"I suppose you have read the extra edition of the papers, Gereaux?" he inquired as soon as they were seated together.

"Oh, yes," replied the Frenchman. "That is rather a remarkable coincidence, the finding of those two bodies in the cabs this morning."

"It is in connection with that affair that I have called upon you so soon."

"Indeed? Has the case been put into your hands?"

"No; but I have rather taken it into my hands; and Gereaux, I want you to go with me right now and view those bodies."

"I? Why should I go?"

"Because I think that without doubt these are the same two young ladies to whom you referred in our conversation last night when you were explaining to me the case which brought you to this country."

The Frenchman started to his feet with some excitement.

"You don't really mean that, Mr. Carter!"

"Indeed, I do mean it. I am quite certain of it."

"But how so? Why? Tell me!"

"Before I tell you that, Gereaux, and before we start for the morgue for you to view the bodies, I want to describe to you my own experiences after I parted with you here at this club last night."

"All right, Mr. Carter."

"When you were describing the details of your ca. to me you did not mention names. You merely explained the circumstances that surrounded."

"Yes, but my reasons for that, Mr. Carter——"

"Oh, I understand your reasons perfectly well, Gereaux. It was because you preferred to leave the details until our next interview; but you did describe to me, or, rather, you gave me the idea that one of the men whom you are seeking is a powerfully built, shrewd, sharp fellow who has always about him an air of command. In fact, you referred to him as if you yourself felt some admiration for his ability."

"That is quite true."

"I will ask you, then," said Nick, "if by any chance his given name is Pierre?"

"It is!" exclaimed the Frenchman, with more show of excitement.

"In that case," said Nick, smiling, "his companion, the one who fled to this country with him, should be called Jules, and, if I mistake not, there is a woman mixed up in the case whose name is Natalie."

"Well! well! well! Mr. Carter," exclaimed the Frenchman, "you certainly have wonderful penetration to have discovered all that so soon."

"Not so much penetration as chance, chief," said the detective; and he began then to recite in detail his own experiences from the moment when he and Gereaux parted at the club.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF THE SECRET SERVICE CHIEF.

"It is the most remarkable circumstance I ever heard of in my life," said the French chief of police when Nick Carter had finished his recital, "and about the most remarkable part of it is that twice last night your friend Connolly should have found himself shut up in a cab with a dead woman."

"Of course," said the detective, "the people who put him in the cab with Yvonne——"

"One moment," said the chief. "I did not interrupt you during your last recital when you mentioned

ning names of Adrienne and Yvonne because you had better already prepared me to hear that, but I should tell you now before you go any further that they are without any doubt the two young women in whose interest I have come here, but whom I supposed at this moment to be in France. Now, sir, you will please continue."

"Of course, the people who put Connolly in the cab with Yvonne," the detective continued, without commenting upon what the chief had said, "had no idea that he had already discovered the body of Adrienne; and it is further to be supposed that they also had no idea that he, no more than Yvonne, would ever leave that cab alive."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Carter."

"The man with the weak voice whom Connolly describes as a youth was evidently expected to take Connolly's life before he left him, and I will ask you right here if you have any idea who that person is?"

"No, Mr. Carter, I haven't. He is the unknown quantity in this case."

"Chief, you describe those two young women last night as being half-sisters."

"Yes, if they are the same to whom I referred, and I have now no doubt they are."

"You spoke of them as being practically without relatives save one whom they had not seen for many years. Now, may I ask if that one was a brother?"

"Yes, a full brother of Adrienne and a half-brother of Yvonne."

"Would the description I have given you of his voice and manner tally with him?"

"That I do not know, Mr. Carter, for I have never seen him."

"What is his full name?"

"Paul Lafarge."

"And are the sisters also named Lafarge?"

"Yes; they had the same father."

"Now, chief, before we start for the morgue, will you give me a sort of recapitulation of the main points of your story as you told it to me last night?"

The chief settled back in his chair and began in a somewhat monotonous tone of voice:

"Henri Lafarge was an ironmaster in the south of France where he employed a large number of workmen. The foreman of his business was one Pierre Laborde who, upon the death of Lafarge about two years ago, was made superintendent and general manager. Their head bookkeeper was formerly a man named Jules Creel, who upon the death of Lafarge left his employment and became a singer at the music-halls in Paris.

"When Lafarge died he left a fortune of nearly five million francs, which is the equivalent of about one million of your dollars."

The detective nodded, and the chief continued:

"The will of Lafarge left everything to his two daughters who were motherless and did not mention the son who had gone to the bad years before, who had disappeared, and who was supposed to be dead. Laborde was remembered in the will to some considerable extent, and it was the testator's wish that he should be placed in charge of the works. That is the condition that existed up to a time about two months ago when a maid who had been in the employ of the two young women came to me with the story that brought me to this country.

"The iron-works, formerly operated by Lafarge, are in a locality that is somewhat inaccessible. The two young women were without protection save such as was afforded by an aged chaperon, by the employees of the works, and more particularly by Pierre Laborde, who had become the general manager.

"The story told to me by the maid was in effect that the young women were practically prisoners at their château. That they were domineered over by Laborde and that Laborde was gradually but effectually assuming entire control of their properties.

"The case as you know was out of my jurisdiction, being in another department of France, but it interested me to the extent that I took a few days off duty and under an assumed name visited the iron-works to investigate quietly what the maid had told me. When I arrived there, both the young women had disappeared, and I was told that they had gone across the mountains into Spain on a visit to some relatives.

"I had no reason to doubt this statement, and I saw nothing at the works which convinced me that there was anything wrong going on. I, therefore,

returned at once to Paris and resumed my duties; but the following day I sent for the maid at the address she had given me—and discovered that she had been found dead in her bed that morning by the concierge."

"Murder?" asked Nick.

"Yes, although it did not appear so at first."

"What killed her?"

"She was suffocated by the fumes of charcoal, but when I examined the body and investigated the surroundings, I discovered the marks of cords upon her wrists, showing that she had been foully dealt with. Every crack and crevice in the room she slept in had been stuffed with cotton so the deadly fumes of charcoal could not escape. I came to the conclusion then and there that it was a case of murder, and that the cotton stuffing and the charcoal fumes were merely means which the assassins took to give the impression of suicide. I suppose, Mr. Carter, that you are aware of the fact that suffocation by the fumes of charcoal is the favorite method employed by suicides in Paris?"

"Yes, I have often heard that."

"The discovery of the body of the maid interested me anew in the story she had told me. I was impressed by the idea that somehow this Pierre Laborde had discovered that she had been to see me, and had immediately taken severe measures to prevent a repetition of the offense.

"It was two or three days after that before I could again absent myself from Paris, but, in the meantime, I sent one of my men to the iron-works to make a quiet investigation and report whatever came to his knowledge. He returned the following day and informed me that everything was running with apparent smoothness, and that the two young women had returned to their home.

"I decided, because of this, that, perhaps, the whole story was the result of a too vivid imagination on the part of the maid, and, being very busy at the time, I gave the subject no more thought until almost two weeks thereafter when, finding that I had a day of leisure, I again made the journey to the iron-works.

"Imagine my surprise when upon my arrival I was told that the entire concern had been sold, together with the château, and that the young women had gone to Paris to live. There was no information obtainable as to what had become of Pierre Laborde. I returned to Paris and detailed several men upon the case; one to get together all obtainable information about Laborde, the other to find the two young women and to secure their story of the affair. You will observe, Mr. Carter, the case had not assumed the proportions that would render it important."

"Quite so," said the detective.

"The man whom I had put on the Laborde investigation brought back the information that he had gone to America in company with the former bookkeeper whom I have already mentioned. The man whom I had sent to inquire about the young women told me that he had found them and talked with them and that he had been assured that there was no foundation whatever for the story told to me by the maid. Right there, Mr. Carter, I let the matter rest, and it continued to so rest until one day when a banker of my acquaintance called upon me and told me that he thought my attention should be called to the unfortunate predicament in which the Mademoiselles Lafarge found themselves or would find themselves when they again appeared at the bank. From his story it was quickly shown to me that by some means that were not honest every available cash resource that belonged to these young women had been drawn from the bank by Pierre Laborde or by some one representing him. The banker asserted that the signatures of the two young women were genuine as far as he knew, but he did not believe that they had been obtained by force or fraud.

"Even then, Mr. Carter, I doubt if I would have moved in the matter were it not for the fact that the two men I had detailed to the case of the maid who was murdered by the fumes of charcoal reported to me with almost positive evidence that pointed to Pierre Laborde as the murderer.

"That, Mr. Carter, is the case just as it stands, and when I asked you to consult with me, it was in the hope that you could greatly assist me in finding Laborde, whom I believe undoubtedly to be hiding in this city.

"But now it would appear that his plots have gone

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keeper, and possibly by the rascally brother of the two girls, has brought them over here to murder them, intending later to so direct affairs that all of the property that remains will presently fall into the hands of himself and that rascally brother."

CHAPTER X.

NICK CARTER UNDERTAKES A TEST.

The detective got upon his feet and lighted a fresh cigar.

"Chief, I am going now to call a cab and to ask you to make your visit to the morgue alone."

"Why will you not accompany me, Mr. Carter?"

"Because, chief, I have an idea that we're up against a pretty slick proposition in this man Laborde. I think that if we move after him at all, we must move quickly, for it is my opinion that he will lose no time, now that the obstacles in his way are removed, in going away from New York, and very probably returning to Paris."

"I don't think he will go there now," remarked the chief, smiling.

"Why not?"

"Because if he is as clever as you say he is, he will know that he is a marked man. The case of the murdered maid is against him, if nothing else."

"Well, then, he will send Paul Lafarge to Paris to claim the property."

"In order that Paul Lafarge may do that," smiled the chief, shrugging his shoulders, "he must first prove the death of his sisters."

It was Nick's turn to smile now.

"Don't you suppose, chief," he asked, "that they have already made arrangements to accomplish that?"

"How would they do it?"

"Are there not many people in France who knew these sisters by sight?"

"Undoubtedly."

"For a consideration, don't you suppose that there are workmen down at the iron-works, or people who live in the village adjacent to it, who might be traveling in this country at the present time?"

"I see your point. Yes, that is so."

"What is more natural, then," continued the detective, "that, after reading the newspapers, they should be impelled by mere curiosity, of course, to visit the morgue, and so make a surprised identification of the two bodies?"

"I believe you're right, Mr. Carter."

"Believe me," said Nick, "Laborde has not undertaken this stupendous deal without having carefully prearranged every step he would take."

"Again I think you're right."

"So, chief, I think it would be well if you should anticipate them. I think it would be well if you should identify the bodies yourself, giving an assumed name, of course, in doing so, and in that way upset at least one of Laborde's schemes."

"Perhaps you are right about that, Mr. Carter. I will think about it as I drive over. In the meantime, may I ask what you intend to do?"

"I am going out right now on the trail of Pierre Laborde."

"Pray, sir, how do you expect to find it?"

"I don't know that, but I believe that I can find it."

"If I were to undertake it," said the chief, "and if the thing had happened in Paris, I would turn every reserve member of my force loose in the district where the house of mystery was located, and I would have a house-to-house search made in that locality until the desired one was found."

"We don't do things in just that way here, chief; at least, I do not, and, furthermore, I have no official connection with the police; but I have a theory which I intend to try at once. I will meet you here at the club this evening."

When Nick Carter left the Cretorian, he hastened at once to his own house, and was agreeably surprised to find that Connolly was practically recovered from the ill effects of his adventure.

"Ned," he said, "do you feel well enough to take a ride with me?"

"Oh, yes, I think so, Nick. Where do you want to go?"

"I want to try an experiment, if you think you're strong enough to undertake it."

"What sort of an experiment?"

"I am going to take you up to the Grand Central Station, and put you into a taxicab that I have ordered by telephone to be there waiting for us. I want you to walk into the station, then turn about and come out of it again, and stand upon the front steps, precisely as you did last night when you arrived in the city."

"Oh, all right, I can do that; but I don't see what you are up to."

"I want you to stand there for a moment or two with your eyes closed, then I will take you by the arm and lead you to the cab, just as the driver did last night. I will open the door, and you will enter the cab, still with your eyes closed. I will enter it with you, and sit down opposite you, in approximately the same position occupied by Adrienne when you discovered her."

"Oh, I begin to see what you are getting at."

"I want you to keep your eyes closed all the time. I will previously have instructed the driver how he is to proceed."

"Well, what then?"

"I suppose you went rather slowly along the street after the cab started, did you not?"

"No, we went along quite merrily until we turned; after that it was slow."

"And you are quite confident that it was Fifth Avenue where you turned?"

"Yes, I am almost positive of that."

"Come, then, and we will make the effort I have described."

"But what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to concentrate your mind upon the events of last evening which followed immediately after you entered the cab, and to estimate the time consumed, as nearly as you can, until you got out of the cab."

"Gee, Nick, I don't believe I can do that!"

"You can at least try."

"Oh, yes, I can do that; but I haven't the slightest idea how far we went."

"Can't you concentrate your mind thoroughly and firmly upon what occurred last night, and upon the thoughts you had while you were riding in that cab, up to the time you discovered that you were not alone in it, and after that time when you made the discovery that you were alone with the corpse? Can't you concentrate your mind so entirely upon those things as almost to reenact every item of incident and thought that took place then?"

"I don't know, Nick, but I'll try."

They had left the house while they were talking, and they soon arrived at their destination.

Nick Carter occupied a few moments in giving a few instructions to the chauffeur, and then the little comedy of entering the cab was enacted.

Connelly kept his eyes closed tightly all the time, and Nick huddled himself over in the corner, silently observant of Connolly's pale and careworn face.

He could see the effort of concentration which Connolly was using, and he knew that his friend was carefully and methodically going over in his mind every thought that had occurred to him the preceding night, as far as it was possible for him to do so.

The taxicab reached the corner of Fifth Avenue, and turned after that, but crept along at a snail's pace, zigzagging here and there, now and then scraping the curbstone with its wheels, until finally Connolly spoke up sharply:

"We should turn to the left, Nick. I remember that;" but he said it without opening his eyes.

Nick called out the direction to the driver, warning him to go even more slowly than he was, and again they continued on their way.

At a little distance farther on, Connolly again spoke out quickly.

"We should turn to the left here again," he said. "That is, we should if I am figuring this time correctly."

Nick reached his hand out of the window—they were at that moment scraping against the curb on the right-hand side of the street, and calling the attention of the driver to his gestures, signaled to him to turn about.

Slowly the cab rolled along until it was headed in the opposite direction, and slowly, again scraping the

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curb on its right, it approached the corner they had lately turned.

Again, when they were half across the avenue, Connolly spoke.

"Turn to the right here, Nick," he said; and the detective gave the required signal to the chauffeur.

He was well pleased with their experiment so far as it had gone, as, on the two or three occasions when Connolly told him to turn, they had been exactly at a corner.

But now they were traveling south, instead of north. It was ten minutes after that before Connolly spoke again, and then he said sharply:

"Turn to the left."

Again they were at a corner of one of the cross-streets, and then again they continued on their way for some distance before Connolly spoke.

"Now to the right," he cried out;" and the cab, in obedience to Nick Carter's signal, wheeled around a corner into Lexington Avenue.

It was less than five minutes after that when Connolly started to his feet, opened his eyes, and exclaimed:

"Now stop!"

"Do you think you have found the place?" asked the detective.

"I have no more idea than you have, Nick, but it is as near to finding it as I will ever be able to accomplish it."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SEARCH FOR THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

There are reasons which the reader will appreciate why the exact locality where the taxicab came to a stop by Connolly's direction is not revealed.

No property-owner in the city of New York, or in the world, for that matter, likes to have it said that a murder has been committed in his house. We will, therefore, state merely that the point at which the cab stopped was on Lexington Avenue, below Forty-second Street, and above Thirtieth Street. That is sufficiently near for the purpose of this story.

They had stopped, too, exactly in the middle of a block, just as Connolly had described in his story. That is, he had supposed it to be in the middle of the block, because of the route he took in walking through the fog after he left Jim Hardy in the cab.

"I think, Ned," said the detective, detaining him before he could leave the cab, "that you have done remarkably well. Personally, I haven't the slightest doubt that we are in the vicinity of the occurrences of last night; but I haven't done with you yet."

"It's an awful strain," groaned Connolly.

"Yes, I know, and you are undertaking it nobly, and I want you to make a further effort."

"Very well; what is it?"

"I want you to step out of the cab with your eyes closed. I want you to start down the street—by the way, you haven't discovered where you are, have you, Ned?"

"No, Nick, I haven't looked outside of the window."

"And you have no idea of our present location?"

"None whatever."

"If you undertake to make a guess about it, what would you say?"

"I should say that we were somewhere in the vicinity of Fifty-eight or Fifty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue."

"All right; that will do for the present. Now for the rest you are about to undertake."

"Yes; what is it?"

"Promise me that you will keep your eyes tightly closed?"

"I will."

"We will step out of the cab, and you can stand, relatively, in the same position you occupied last night while you were talking with Hardy, after you had examined the features of the dead woman with your lighted vestas."

"I can do that, all right."

"After that, I want you to walk away from the cab, past the front or the rear of it——"

"I started away to the rear of it, Nick."

"Very well, I want you to walk in that direction, and with as nearly as possible the same speed you used when you left it last night. Follow as nearly as you can the same course. Didn't you tell me that you counted your steps?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you count them also after you turned?"

"Certainly; I was in search of the sidewalks of the street, and of the house beyond."

"Well, then, count your steps this time, make them as nearly as possible the same length as you did then."

"Oh, I can do that, all right."

"Come, then; I will protect you from collision with vehicles and persons. Just consider that you own the street for the present."

So they started down Lexington Avenue, Connolly with his eyes closed tightly, but, nevertheless, pursuing a wonderfully straight course under the circumstances.

If some time you, the reader, should wish to undertake this test, close your eyes and try to walk straight along the middle of a road, and you will realize then how difficult a task it is.

During the walk, while Connolly was counting his steps, Nick kept closely beside him.

Twice he was compelled to rush forward and to show his shield, in order to compel teamsters to turn aside.

When Connolly at last reached the end of his first count, he was exactly at the intersection of the avenue with one of the cross-streets.

"I turn here," he said to Nick.

"Very well; turn and proceed."

Connolly made the half-turn with military precision.

"I moved my feet in just exactly that manner last night, Nick," he said, "because I wanted to turn just so far."

"I understand."

"Am I facing now at right angles from the way I was going?"

"Never mind that, if you think you are right."

Connolly started on again, counting as before.

This time there were no vehicles in their way, and the count was finished without incident.

"I stop here," said Connolly suddenly.

"Very good," said Nick.

"I turn again to the left."

"All right."

"If we are correct in this experiment, I am now exactly facing the house where I found the door open, and which I entered."

"Well, go on."

"Is any one watching us, Nick? I must look like a fool."

"No, we are unobserved, Ned. A couple of boys on the corner seem interested in what we are doing; that is all."

"Is there a house in front of me?"

"Naturally, since there are houses on all New York streets."

"A house with a high stoop?"

"Don't ask so many questions, Ned. Confine yourself to the business at hand."

"I remember that I took twelve very short and mincing steps before I touched the curb."

"All right; go ahead and try it."

Connolly moved forward again, this time counting aloud and, as he explained, taking very short and mincing steps as he proceeded.

At the twelfth of these, his toe kicked against the curbstone.

"By Jove, Nick!" he exclaimed. "I shouldn't wonder if this experiment panned out, after all."

"Go on! Don't talk!" directed the detective.

Connolly raised his foot gingerly, and drew himself up on the sidewalk, then he groped forward with his hands outstretched, and, remarkable as it may seem, he crossed directly to the right-hand balustrade that guarded a flight of stone steps that was before him.

For a moment, as he grasped the pillar of the balustrade, he shuddered, and then, in a voice that was husky with suppressed emotion, he exclaimed:

"It is the same, Nick! By Heaven, it is the same! I know it by the feel of it!"

"Don't be too sure, Ned."

"I am certain of it, Nick, but I can make myself still more confident."

"How?"

"It should be a high stoop; an unusually high one."

"Yes; well?"

"There should be eleven steps in ascending it."

"Perhaps there are. You will know when you count them."

"Shall I go ahead?"

"Certainly; we undertook this experiment with the purpose of carrying it out to the end."

"Is there any one watching us?"

"No, Ned; I don't think a single person has observed us."

"Is the vestibule door of the house open?"

"No; it is closed."

"Are there carvings on the right-hand section of the door as I approach it?"

"Why do you ask that question?"

"Because there were carvings on the one I touched last night."

"You did not tell me that, Ned."

"No; I had forgotten it until now."

"Do you think you would recognize them by the touch?"

"I am almost certain of it, Nick. This working with my eyes closed is a wonderful method of concentration."

"Yes, I knew that when I asked you to do it."

"Shall I go ahead now?"

"By all means."

"And are you positive that there is no one there?"

"Absolutely so."

"And there is no one at the windows of the house watching us?"

"No one."

"Perhaps the curtains are drawn, Nick?"

"They are. Stop talking, Ned, and go ahead."

Slowly Connolly ran his hand down over the post of the balustrade until it encountered the rail, and again he shuddered as he did so.

"It's the same, Nick! I know it's the same! I know it by the feeling of it," he murmured.

Then he began to mount the steps.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven," he counted, as he proceeded, and he was at the top.

"Nick!" he exclaimed, "do you suppose that I am right? Do you believe that we have found the house?"

"Hush, Ned! Go on with the experiment. Don't ask questions now."

Connolly took a step forward. He reached out his right hand and groped as he must have groped last night in search of the bell.

Then his hand wandered to the carvings on the door, and slowly, very slowly, indeed, he passed it over them one by one, until suddenly he uttered a cry and staggered back, and would have fallen had not Nick Carter caught him in his arms.

"It's the same house, Nick. I'd swear to it!" he cried huskily.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ARREST.

Nick Carter had been entirely upon the alert during every moment that had elapsed since they got out of the cab on Lexington Avenue, particularly had he been watchful since they made the turn into the side street and approached the house which Connolly had so positively identified with his eyes closed.

He was sure that they had not been observed. He was entirely certain that no one from inside that house had seen them.

He had watched every expression on Connolly's face, every motion of his features and of his body since their departure from the Grand Central Station, and in his own mind he was as positive about the correctness of the result of their test as Edward Connolly was himself.

"Pull yourself together, Ned," he said. "Don't faint away."

"Oh, I'm all right now, old man, but the thing almost overcame me."

"Do you think, Ned, that you could do a little something now to help me?"

"I can do anything, Nick, if only there is a little action in it, but I couldn't go another block with my eyes closed to save my life."

"Listen, then, around the corner, on Lexington Avenue——"

"Lexington Avenue!" cried Connolly.

"Yes, Lexington Avenue, Ned. You will know the number of the cross-street when you get to the corner. Now, pay attention to what I am going to tell you."

"Yes, go ahead."

"Around the corner, on Lexington Avenue, a block away, is a drug-store. It probably has a telephone. Go there as quickly as you can. Call up the Cretorian Club, and ask if Monsieur Gereaux is there. If he is there, get him on the phone as quickly as possible. If he is not there, call up the office of the morgue, where you will probably find him. If you don't find him at either place, wait a few moments, and call up the Cretorian Club again."

"Well, and if I get him? What then?"

"Tell him where you are. Ask him to jump into one of the taxicabs in front of the club, and to get to you as quickly as the chauffeur can bring him. You will know him by his general French appearance, his iron-gray pointed beard, and by the fact that he comes to you in a taxicab."

"Well?"

"Wait there for him until he arrives. Telephone frequently until you get him. The moment he does arrive, bring him here to me."

"And where will you be?"

"Right here, Ned, where I am now. I shall not leave this stoop until Gereaux gets here—and I shall not permit anybody to leave this house, either."

"You are convinced, then, that we are correct?"

"I am mighty near to being convinced, Ned. Now hurry!"

Did you ever, my reader, spend a half-hour in awaiting the arrival of some person when every moment of that time was fraught with possibilities which might prove fatal to your desires?

If you have, you will understand something about the condition of Nick Carter's mind while he stood there upon those front steps, awaiting the coming of Henri Gereaux, acting chief of the Paris secret police.

The detective looked at his watch when Connolly left him, and he looked at it again when Connolly reappeared at the corner, accompanied by Gereaux, and exactly thirty-nine minutes had elapsed in the interim.

It is to be doubted if ever in his life Nick Carter was more glad to see any person than he was the Paris chief at that moment.

The two mounted the steps together and joined the detective on the stoop, and in as few and as concise words as possible, the detective explained what had happened, and why he had summoned his Parisian friend to come there.

"I haven't a doubt, Gereaux, that this is the house we seek—that this is the house of mystery," he said, in conclusion. "And now it remains for us to enter it and investigate."

"We have no warrant," said the chief.

"We will not wait for one," replied Nick. "We will enter without warrant and without permission."

Without more words, Nick Carter produced his pick-lock, that wonderful little instrument which we have seen him use so often and so expertly, an invention of his own, as we know.

A moment later the door swung open; that is, as far as the chain-bolt inside would permit it to do. A pair of nippers from one of Nick Carter's pockets made short work of that, as it did upon the chain upon the inner door when that had also yielded to the detective's picklock. They stepped into a silent hallway, and, with a gesture, Nick indicated to Connolly that he was to remain on guard at the door. Then motioning to Gereaux to follow after him, he tiptoed silently along the hall toward a door at the end of it, noticing as he advanced that there were two doors opening from the hall to the left, exactly as Connolly had described them.

When the door at the end of the hall was reached, the detective paused and placed his ear against it, but hearing nothing, after listening for several moments, he slowly and silently turned the knob.

When he pressed against the panels, however, the door resisted his efforts, and again stooping down, he discovered that the key had been turned from the inside and was still in the lock.

Even this fact did not disturb him, for he carried one of those small instruments that are known as burglar's forceps, with which housebreakers turn keys from the opposite side from whence they have been used.

Seizing the post of the key between the concave two black surfaces of the forceps, he turned it slowly but firmly, and in a moment more the bolt of the lock shot back with a loud click.

An exclamation sounded from beyond the door just as Nick Carter, turning the knob again, threw it open.

He sprang inside the room, closely followed by Gereaux, just as a big black-mustached man started from his seat in the depths of a large chair upholstered in plush.

It was evident that the fellow had been asleep. He wore neither coat nor waistcoat, and his collar and tie were missing.

A second man also started up, and the two sat there for an instant, only gazing in a half-stupefied manner upon the intruders.

It was Gereaux who took the initiative now, and he did it in a manner that was entirely French, although quite as entirely compelling. He took one quick stride forward, raising both hands as he did so, and Nick saw, with a smile, that each one contained a weapon which, although small, was of sufficiently large caliber.

"Good day to you, messieurs," he said, in French, and in his politest tones. "I hope I find you quite well, Monsieur Laborde, and you also, Monsieur Creel. It is an unexpected meeting, is it not? You did not look for me? No? I have surprised you, then? Ah, do not say, messieurs, that you are not glad to see me, for I assure you that it gives me most infinite pleasure to encounter you again. Don't move your hands, Laborde. These little weapons that I hold in my fingers are easily exploded. One of them, as you will observe, is pointed at you. The other one, as Monsieur Creel will likewise observe, is pointed at him; therefore, I should advise that each of you preserve your present positions without moving, as motion on the part of either of you might prove to be dangerous.

"And may I ask, Monsieur Laborde, and you, also, Monsieur Creel, what you have done with the Mademoiselles Adrienne and Yvonne? I have been informed that they were in your care. Are they here? Yes? No? Then they are not here? Where are they?

"What? You do not answer? Are they, perhaps, the two young ladies who are unfortunately at the morgue this morning?

"Are they, perhaps, the two young ladies to whom you, assisted by Natalie Laborde and by their inhuman brother, administered prussic acid last night?

"I see that you comprehend me. I observe that I am right in my estimate."

Suddenly his manner changed. From the bantering tone, he became coldly stern.

"Laborde, and you, Creel, hold out your hands straight in front of you. Quick, or I will kill you as I should do!"

The hands came out without a word.

"Mr. Carter," continued Gereaux, "have you with you, perhaps, anything which we can use to manacle these brutes, or shall we be compelled to pull a picture from the wall?"

Nick, who had prepared himself for something of this kind when he started out, supplied two pairs of handcuffs, but, instead of pinioning the two men separately, he handcuffed them together, and in such a way that, when it was accomplished, one arm of each of them reached across in front of one arm of the other man in like position, thus they were rendered helpless.

The detective called Connolly into the room then, and he instantly recognized it as the one where he had met with his strange experiences the preceding night.

Natalie, the wife of Pierre Laborde, as she proved to be, was found sleeping in a room up-stairs, and presently, by the aid of the two taxicabs—that which had brought Nick and Connolly and also the one used by Gereaux—the three prisoners were taken, not to the station-house, but directly to police headquarters, where the proper charges were made against them.

And so ended one of the strangest experiences and one of the most satisfactory detective tests in Nick Carter's varied career.

It should be added here that the inhuman brother, Paul Lafarge, was not found in the house of mystery. He had entirely disappeared.

THE END.

The next number (629) will contain "The Disappearance of Monsieur Gereaux; or, Nick Carter and the River Pirates."

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A NIGHT OF TERROR.

By W. L. SUMMERS.

It was, indeed, a strange, wild place in which Jack Mason and Frank Peters found themselves at the close of a sultry day in August.

On each side rose towering cliffs, grim and blackened, as if just thrown from some huge subterranean furnace, while over the barren summits fell the fierce rays of an Arizona sun.

Two days before, these two boys had left Mason's ranch and urged their little horses forward across the sandy desert toward the distant Mogollon Mountains, which raised their sun-scorched tops above the arid plain, and now they were making their way through a deep cañon in the heart of the range.

Frank was spending a month on Jack's father's ranch in Southern Arizona.

Strange stories were told among the Mexicans of wonderful discoveries of gold that had been made in that part of the Mogollon range known as the Devil's Mountains, and, led by these reports, Jack and Frank had set out for a week's prospecting in that vicinity.

There were rumors of prospectors who had gone into these uniquely named hills in search of gold and had never returned.

A Mexican herder on the ranch had warned the young adventurers not to go into the Devil's Mountains.

"If you go there, you will never come back!" he had exclaimed, gazing toward the hills.

But having little faith in Mexican traditions, and a strong desire to prospect for gold, Jack and Frank were determined to penetrate the Devil's Mountains and learn for themselves what secrets were hidden there.

The sun was low in the horizon when they halted in a deep, narrow cañon, and, unpacking the horses, concluded to stop there for the night.

"This place looks as if it might be the abode of the evil one, indeed," said Frank, casting his eyes toward the blackened rocks that towered above.

Then he added, with a smile:

"We will give him a warm reception if he interferes with us during our visit," and he laid his hand upon a Winchester rifle that leaned against the cliff at his side.

Suddenly Jack rose from his seat on the grass, an exclamation breaking from his lips.

"What is it?" Frank asked.

"Look!" and Jack pointed up the cañon. "There's a house of some kind."

As Frank turned his eyes in that direction he saw the gray walls of what appeared to be a building about a hundred yards away.

In a few moments they reached the spot.

"An old Aztec building, as I live!" cried Jack, with enthusiasm. "We must spend a day here examining it. How lucky that we came! Who knows what relics may be hidden under this ruined pile?"

Passing through a broken place in the wall, they entered a small space covered with sand and shattered rocks.

The surrounding walls were composed of blocks of pale-yellow cement, and rose a dozen feet above their heads.

It was plain to see that the ruin had once been a habitation of some kind.

The roof had long since disappeared, leaving nothing but the bare walls, fast crumbling with decay, and broken and tumbled down in many places.

"I'm afraid we are many hundreds of years too late to discover much of interest here," observed Frank.

They brought picks, and Frank was soon delving among the scattered rocks and sand that lay between the walls, while Jack was making an examination of the old building.

For half an hour Frank worked in silence without discovering anything to excite special interest.

The loose sand impeded his work, so he returned to the camp and brought a shovel.

But as he resumed work he saw that the sun had gone down.

"Let's give up work for to-night," he said, throwing the tools across his shoulder and starting in the direction of the camp. "We will begin at daylight again in the morning."

He did not see Jack, and, stopping, glanced about.

Jack Mason had disappeared!

For a moment Frank stood dumb with surprise, a strange fear creeping over him.

"Jack!" he called loudly, the echoes of his voice sounding sharp and distinct through the darkening cañon.

Then he listened.

The echoes died away, and no sound broke the stillness save the low moaning of the wind high among the rocks, and the plaintive cry of a whippoorwill in a neighboring chaparral.

Hastily he searched the premises, calling his missing companion again and again, but no trace of Jack could be found.

"Where can he be? What does it mean? I know Jack Mason too well to suspect for an instant that he is playing a joke on me. Something has happened to him; I am confident of that. And yet I have not heard or seen anything to indicate the presence of an enemy. No unusual sound has reached my ears, and surely if he has been attacked by some lurking foe he would have made an outcry to warn me."

Thus Frank soliloquized, and tried to persuade himself that Jack had merely gone away a short distance and would soon return.

He walked a few paces up the cañon, and called Jack again and again, but got no answer.

Darkness was fast rendering surrounding objects indistinct.

Suddenly realizing the fact that unseen foes might be lurking near, Frank hastily retraced his steps to the camp, where he had left his rifle.

There he found everything as he had left it.

Taking his rifle, he again went up the cañon, to gain, if possible, some clue to Jack's strange disappearance.

But after an hour's search through rocks and thickets, he returned from his fruitless quest with a sinking heart, a mysterious feeling of fear, that could not be shaken off, creeping over him.

Every moment now he expected some deadly foe to emerge from the darkness and assail him.

The strange stories of the Devil's Mountains which he had heard came vividly to his mind and magnified the terrors of his situation.

The night had grown intensely dark.

Frank knew it would be useless to search farther in such darkness.

He could do nothing but keep watch and wait for daylight.

Meantime, he would discharge his gun at intervals, so that if by any chance Jack had wandered away and become lost he might hear the report and return.

Raising his Winchester rifle, Frank fired three shots in rapid succession.

The loud reports echoed and reechoed sharp and distinct through the gloomy cañon.

A night-bird rose near, with screams of fright, and flew down the cañon with swish of rapid wings.

Then all was silent as before.

For some time Frank stood listening intently; then threw himself upon the short, dry grass, a prey to the most gloomy reflections.

With the first streaks of day he was hurriedly searching through the cañon for some trace of his missing companion.

For hours he continued to explore every turn in the cliff and every thicket, but could find nothing to give the slightest clue to the cause of Jack's mysterious disappearance.

He was turning his steps toward the camp from up the cañon, when he suddenly came upon one of the horses, that had pulled up the picket-pin and strayed away.

Taking in his hand the end of the lariat, he led the animal back down the cañon.

Passing along the north side of the old ruin, he was in the act of crossing a wide flat slab of stone which lay close under the wall, when he felt it tremble beneath his feet.

The next moment it turned, as if on a pivot, and before he could realize what was taking place, Frank staggered backward and fell into the darkness below.

He struck the bottom with great force, and for a time lay upon his back, stunned and bewildered.

All was blackest night about him.

The rock that had turned to let him in had again closed.

In a moment he realized that he had fallen into a sort of cavern.

Recovering, he raised himself and tried to penetrate the gloom.

As he did so he heard a step close by his side, and the familiar voice of Jack Mason:

"Is it you, Frank? Are you hurt?"

"I am only stunned a little," Frank joyously replied. "Thank Heaven, you are safe, and I have found you at last. I have passed a night of fearful anxiety, and had almost come to the conclusion that you had been killed, or spirited away in some manner."

"And all the time I have been the same as buried alive in this horrible place. Oh, Frank," Jack went on, with emotion, "we can never escape from this hole! No human being could ever scale these smooth walls."

"Have you explored the cave?" Frank asked.

"Yes; it is only a long, narrow chamber cut into the solid rock. By the light of a few matches I had with me I examined the place carefully."

"We will find some means of escaping," said Frank, trying to speak in a cheerful tone. "We have our knives, and can cut steps in the rocky wall. I have a box of matches in my pocket; they will give us enough light to begin work by."

As he spoke he drew forth the box of matches, and, striking a light, gazed about.

They were in what appeared to be a deep cellar, about twenty by twelve feet, with perpendicular walls of smooth rock, rising fully twenty feet above their heads.

"But, Frank," said Jack, in a husky voice, "come with me to the end of the chamber. We are not the only ones who have been entrapped into this horrible place."

Frank followed with a lighted match to where, pausing, Jack pointed at something lying on the rocky floor.

"What does this mean?" cried Frank, in horror.

Before them lay the skeletons of two human beings, grim and ghastly in the flickering light.

"It means," said Jack, in a despairing voice, "that these two have met a fate which we also are likely to meet unless we can manage to escape from this place."

The match dropped from Frank's fingers and was extinguished, leaving them in total darkness.

For some time they stood still, almost stupefied.

Then the voice of Jack broke the oppressive silence.

"Come," he said, taking Frank by the arm, "let us begin work at once. Whatever we do must be done quickly."

He struck another match as they walked back through the chamber, and with it held high they began to examine the rocky wall.

The next moment a cry of joy escaped Jack's lips.

Leaping up, he grasped something that was dangling from the roof above.

A glance revealed that the object in Jack's hand was the end of the lariat which Frank had dragged down with him in his fall.

"Thank Heaven, we are saved!" cried Frank, remembering that he had had the lariat in his hand when he fell. "The other end is securely fastened around the horse's neck. Now let us climb out at once."

"Perhaps the horse may come up to the rock overhead and fall in, too, when he feels the strain on the rope," said Jack, pausing as he was about to ascend.

"Never fear," Frank replied. "He will only pull the harder when he feels your weight upon the lariat."

Jack was an excellent climber.

In a short time he climbed to the rocky roof above.

There he met with difficulty.

The rock that covered the opening through which both had fallen had returned to its place, closing on the lariat, and it was with the greatest exertion that he finally succeeded in forcing the rock up, so as to allow him to pass through.

However, this was soon accomplished, and Frank was overjoyed to see him disappear through the opening above. Then, holding to the rope, Jack bade his friend follow, and in a short time both were safe on the ground above.

With thankful hearts they returned to their camp.

Nothing had been disturbed in their absence, and they inferred that no enemy was near.

That evening they constructed a ladder out of lariats, and, cutting some sticks of resinous wood for torches, returned and explored the cave. They found that the entrance was covered with a large stone nearly six feet square, which turned on a pivot of the same material, and had evidently been constructed by the builders of the old house that stood above it.

But for what purpose it had been used they could never ascertain.

In the cellar or cavern below they found, near the two skeletons, two small buckskin sacks filled with gold nuggets.

They also found a broken gun, a knife, and a few Mexican coins nearly fifty years old, but nothing to establish the identity of the two men who had met death there in the hidden cavern many years before.

As soon as they had finished exploring the cavern they removed the treasure, and then, before leaving the place, took picks and broke the treacherous slab of stone that covered the entrance, to make sure that no others should meet the fate of those unknown men whose skeletons lay in the cavern below.

That night they set out on their return to the ranch, satisfied that they had had adventures enough for one time.

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